

## 3.1 AESTHETICS

This section addresses the potential temporary aesthetic impacts resulting from construction and maintenance activities, as well as long-term impacts from the structures that could be constructed. Overall, impacts to visual resources would be beneficial since approximately 8,100 acres of conservation area would be established and returned to a more natural appearance.

### 3.1.1 Affected Environment

Visual resources consist of the natural and manmade features that give a particular environment its aesthetic qualities. These features may be natural appearing or modified by human activities. Together, they form the overall impression of an area, referred to as its *landscape character*. Landforms, water surfaces, vegetation, and manmade features are treated as characteristic of an area if they are inherent to the formation, structure, and function of the landscape. Landscape character is evaluated to assess whether a proposed project would appear compatible with the existing setting or would contrast noticeably with the setting and appear out of place.

Visual resources also have a social setting, which includes public values, goals, awareness, and concern regarding visual quality. Social setting is addressed as *visual sensitivity*, or the relative degree of public interest in visual resources and concern over adverse changes in the quality of that resource. Visual sensitivity is key in assessing how important an effect on the visual resource would be and whether it represents a significant impact. Recreational uses are generally considered to have high visual sensitivity, as are views from scenic routes or corridors, or along scenic highways and wilderness areas. The primary areas of concern generally are associated with changes to prominent topographic features, changes in the character of an area with high visual sensitivity, removal of vegetation, or blockage of public views of a visually sensitive landscape.

#### 3.1.1.1 Lower Colorado River

##### *Reach 1*

This reach is characterized primarily by open waters of Lake Mead, Hoover Dam, and the surrounding natural and undeveloped land. Visually sensitive resources within this reach include the Lake Mead NRA and Grand Canyon National Park. Scenic routes in the project area include the Valley of Fire State Park scenic byway, which runs south of Interstate 15 (I-15) and north of Highway 93; and Highway 93, which crosses the Colorado River just below Hoover Dam. A popular scenic drive in the Lake Mead NRA is along the North Shore Road, which offers spectacular desert vistas. Visitors to the NRA also may experience scenic vistas from park roads, the lake surface, and while taking walks. Striking backdrops include deep canyons, narrow gorges, dry washes, sheer cliffs, distant mountain ranges, the lakes, colorful soils and rock formations, and mosaics of different vegetation. Panoramic vistas of the Muddy Mountains, the red rocks of Bowl of Fire, Bitter Springs Valley, and the Virgin Basin can be seen from the Northshore Summit Trail. From the water, noted visual resources include Iceberg Canyon in Lake Mead, with its steep, narrow gorges.

#### Reach 2

This reach is generally composed of undeveloped open space and open water, although Davis Dam is a prominent visual feature. The main visually sensitive resource within this reach is Lake Mohave, a narrow, 67-mile stretch of the Colorado River that is bounded for most of its length by the steep walls of Pyramid, Painted, Eldorado, and Black canyons. This area is for a variety of recreational activities, including fishing, boating, swimming, water skiing, camping, picnicking, exploring, auto touring, photography, many of which are enhanced by its scenic atmosphere.

#### Reach 3

This reach is composed of a mix of agriculture, developed land, riparian lands, saltcedar, desert scrub, and the open waters of Lake Havasu. It also includes Parker Dam, which is a prominent feature. Visually sensitive resources include Lake Havasu State Park (including views of the London Bridge) and the Havasu NWR, which includes Topock Gorge and Topock Marsh, and Bill Williams River NWR. Lake Havasu State Park includes a number of recreational opportunities, such as wildlife photography and viewing, hiking, backpacking, and boating, many of which are enhanced by the scenic environment present at the lake and surrounding areas. Havasu NWR contains a natural cottonwood-willow forest and a series of small lakes that comprise Topock Marsh and provides habitat for resident and migratory wildlife. This area is frequented by visitors who come to view wildlife, as well as appreciate the natural beauty of Topock Gorge, which offers views of rock spires, towering cliffs, sand dunes, and the desert. The Bill Williams River NWR has a large manmade marsh, mountains, ravines, sand dunes, water areas, and hills and also attracts visitors who come to view wildlife as well as enjoy its scenic qualities.

#### Reach 4

Most of this reach is dominated by agricultural uses, although it also contains riparian lands, saltcedar, and desert scrub. Urban development is concentrated in the city of Blythe. Visually sensitive resources within this reach include Three Finger Lake, Cibola Lake, and the Cibola NWR, which are characterized by open water and native vegetation. Cibola NWR includes trails and a scenic overlook of Cibola Lake, where visitors may view a wide variety of wildlife in a relatively undisturbed setting. No scenic highways within this reach are visible from the planning area.

#### Reach 5

This reach consists of a mix of open water, saltcedar, marshland, some cotton-willow and desert scrub patches, and other riparian land. Imperial Dam is located within this reach. Visually sensitive resources along this reach include Adobe and Martinez lakes, the Picacho State Recreation Area (SRA), Imperial Reservoir, and the Imperial NWR. These areas are appreciated by visitors for both their scenic qualities as well as the opportunity to view wildlife. Imperial NWR offers views of the last non-channelized section of the LCR, which flows through the refuge and includes more than 15,000 acres of Federally designated wilderness. Wilderness areas are protected to ensure that a quiet, natural setting is maintained. Picacho SRA is more

developed and is popular with boaters, hikers, anglers, and campers. The park offers diverse scenery and wildlife viewing, including, wild burros, bighorn sheep, and migratory waterfowl.

#### *Reach 6*

This reach includes agricultural land and patches of desert scrub, saltcedar, cottonwood-willow, and other riparian lands. Laguna Dam is located within this reach. Visually sensitive resources within this reach include the Mittry Lake Wildlife Area, and sensitive viewpoints associated with recreational areas around Laguna Dam. Mittry Lake covers approximately 750 acres and is popular for nature study and bird watching.

#### *Reach 7*

This reach is characterized by agricultural land and areas of urban development, particularly near Yuma, Arizona. Morelos Diversion Dam also is located in this reach. Agricultural and urban areas are not highly visually sensitive.

#### **3.1.1.2 Muddy River/Moapa Valley and Virgin River**

The Muddy River is bordered by large areas of agricultural land, desert scrub, and some riparian vegetation. Scattered towns also are present. The Virgin River is characterized primarily by desert scrub, riparian vegetation, and patches of agriculture and is generally undeveloped. Visually sensitive resources include Lake Mead NRA and the Overton Wildlife Management Area. Lake Mead NRA is described under Reach 1 in section 3.1.1.1. The Overton Wildlife Management Area provides vistas of grassy fields, canals, ponds, thickets, and other wildlife use areas.

#### **3.1.1.3 Bill Williams River**

This area is generally undeveloped, although Alamo Dam is located at the eastern end of the potential project area. Vegetation is typically desert scrub or riparian woodland/scrub, although small portions are in agricultural use or open water. Visually sensitive resources include Lake Havasu, the Bill Williams River NWR (both of which are described in section 3.1.1.1), and Alamo Lake State Park. Campgrounds at the park have excellent views of the lake and the surrounding mountains. Hiking and wildlife viewing are other activities that are enhanced by the scenic qualities of the lake and mountains.

#### **3.1.1.4 Lower Gila River**

This area is generally in agricultural use or in open space, although urban development is concentrated in Yuma and in small towns along I-8. This area is not highly visually sensitive.

### **3.1.2 Environmental Consequences**

#### ***Significance Criteria***

The project would have a significant environmental impact on aesthetic resources if it would result in any of the following:

- have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or
- create a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

#### 3.1.2.1 Alternative 1: Proposed Conservation Plan

##### *Impacts*

**Impact AESTH-1: Construction/maintenance activities would temporarily lessen the visual quality of the conservation area establishment sites located on or near visually sensitive resources.** Visually sensitive resources are located in Reaches 1 through 6 where much of the conservation area would be established. Implementation of conservation measures would require actions such as clearing/burning vegetation, grading, excavating, dredging, stockpiling soil, construction/modification of supply canals, berm and swale construction, and planting. These types of activities are common in agricultural areas, where at least some conservation area establishment likely would be implemented; moreover, agricultural areas are not considered visually sensitive. Conservation area establishment actions also could be implemented on undeveloped land on or near sensitive resources, such as wildlife refuges or recreational areas. The duration of the impact would depend upon the size of the site and on whether the site previously was used for agricultural purposes or was undeveloped. It is estimated that agricultural sites would require 1/5 of the grading of undeveloped sites. Impacts from developing individual sites could last from several months to several years, although only portions of the larger sites would be under development at any one time. While the construction activities could degrade the existing visual character or quality of a site, the impact would be temporary and would not be considered a substantial degradation of the visual character or quality of the site or its surroundings. Thus, construction impacts would be *less than significant*.

**Impact AESTH-2: The construction of field facilities and fish-rearing facilities could be required, which could alter the visual quality of the selected sites.** The proposed action also could involve the construction of two field facilities and fish-rearing facilities. The field facilities probably would be located in developed areas within Blythe and the Mohave Valley, and would consist of a small, prefabricated steel building and an equipment yard. These facilities would require several acres at most and would be fenced. They probably would be constructed on bare ground or at an already developed and graded site. Thus, minimal grading would be required. The fish-rearing facilities would include raceways and growout ponds that likely would not exceed 1 acre. Along with the growout ponds, the facilities could contain other structures, such as a small office building and feed and equipment storage, to support the operation. The only potential source of light or glare would be low-level security lighting should it be required. These facilities would not be located on recreational lands or other lands that are considered visually sensitive. Impacts would be *less than significant* since their construction would not substantially damage scenic resources or the existing visual character or quality of the construction sites, nor would they create a new source of substantial light or glare.

1 **Impact AESTH-3: Conservation area establishment would return sites to a more natural**  
2 **appearance.** Overall, impacts of the proposed action to the visual resources discussed above  
3 would be *beneficial* because it would establish and maintain over 8,000 acres of land that are  
4 currently in agricultural production or undeveloped land that is characterized by invasive, non-  
5 native species. The proposed action also includes measures that would establish native  
6 vegetation in the event of wildfires. Currently, when fires occur, native vegetation is often  
7 supplanted by saltcedar, which is an invasive, introduced species.

#### 8 *Mitigation Measures*

9 No mitigation measures are required because no significant impacts would occur.

#### 10 *Residual Impacts*

11 Residual impacts are those that would occur after the implementation of mitigation measures to  
12 reduce an impact. No mitigation measures are required; thus, no residual impacts would occur.

#### 13 **3.1.2.2 Alternative 2: No Action Alternative**

14 Under the no action alternative, it is likely that conservation measures similar to those included  
15 in the proposed action would likely be implemented since compliance with the ESA still would  
16 be required for the covered activities, although some conservation could occur in the off-site  
17 conservation areas (as described in section 3.1.2.4 below), as well as along the LCR. **Impacts**  
18 **AESTH-1, AESTH-2, and AESTH-3** generally apply to Alternative 2, although as noted below,  
19 **Impact AESTH-1** would not apply to conservation implemented along the lower Gila River  
20 since it is not considered a visually sensitive area. To the extent that the agencies undertaking  
21 the covered activities proceed with ESA compliance through section 7 consultations instead of  
22 the section 10 permitting process, there may be a reduced number of covered species because  
23 unlisted species would not be included. This would also likely result in less conservation area  
24 being established. Short-term construction disturbances, identified under **Impact AESTH-1**,  
25 would be somewhat lessened because smaller amounts of conservation area would be  
26 established. The establishment of a larger number of smaller-sized mitigation projects would,  
27 however, result in increased need for infrastructure (access roads and irrigation  
28 pipelines/canals and pump facilities). This would result in greater disturbance than would  
29 occur under the proposed action, and therefore incrementally greater aesthetic impacts from  
30 this component of the Conservation Plan. Overall, conservation area construction-related  
31 impacts would be comparable to the proposed action. Since each individual project would  
32 establish its own mitigation sites, it is likely that more maintenance and storage facilities would  
33 be required. Thus, impacts from this component of the Conservation Plan would be  
34 incrementally greater than described under **Impact AESTH-2** for the proposed action. The  
35 long-term beneficial impact described under **Impact AESTH-3** would be less than under the  
36 proposed action because less conservation area would be established.

#### 37 *Mitigation Measures*

38 No mitigation measures are required because no significant impacts would occur.

#### Residual Impacts

Residual impacts are those that would occur after the implementation of mitigation measures to reduce an impact. No mitigation measures are required; thus, no residual impacts would occur.

#### 3.1.2.3 Alternative 3: Listed Species Only

#### Impacts

**Impacts AESTH-1, AESTH-2, and AESTH-3** apply to Alternative 3. The magnitude of the impacts, including beneficial impacts, would be reduced since less conservation would occur.

#### Mitigation Measures

No mitigation measures are required because no significant impacts would occur.

#### Residual Impacts

Residual impacts are those that would occur after the implementation of mitigation measures to reduce an impact. No mitigation measures are required; thus, no residual impacts would occur.

#### 3.1.2.4 Alternative 4: Off-Site Conservation

#### Impacts

The potential impacts described in **Impact AESTH-1** also are applicable to visually sensitive resources located along the Muddy, Virgin, and Bill Williams rivers. They are not applicable to development on the lower Gila River since it is not considered a visually sensitive area. The scope of the activities required to establish conservation areas would be substantially the same as described in Alternative 1, but would be located in these off-site locations. Therefore, the effect of the impact described in **Impact AESTH-1** would be *less than significant* for the reasons set forth under Alternative 1. The location of backwaters, field facilities, and fish-rearing facilities would be the same under this alternative as Alternative 1, and the potential impacts from these facilities described under **Impact AESTH-2** would also be the same, i.e., *less than significant*. The *beneficial* impact described in **Impact AESTH-3** would also result from Alternative 4, but a portion of the benefit would be located along the Muddy, Virgin, Bill Williams and lower Gila rivers to the extent that conservation areas are located in these areas.

#### Mitigation Measures

No mitigation measures are required because no significant impacts would occur.

#### Residual Impacts

Residual impacts are those that would occur after the implementation of mitigation measures to reduce an impact. No mitigation measures are required; thus, no residual impacts would occur.

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